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The world in a suitcase: psychosocial support using artwork with refugee children in South Africa

by GLYNIS CLACHERTY

Introduction

This article is about the Suitcase Project, which helps refugee children to use artwork to share their stories and their feelings.

Open up these suitcases, look inside and find out what refugees' lives are like.

I am going to always take this suitcase with me. I want to go to Australia and I will take this suitcase for my interview because it tells my history.

This suitcase is a good memory. I want to keep it for my children so they will know what I have done and where I have been with this suitcase, my life.

I remember when I left my country there were many people waiting at the bus and there was a pile of suitcases. My suitcase reminds me of that time when we were all pushing to get on the bus and we were afraid and we wanted to get away because of the war.

We made these suitcases for some of the people out there. There are rich people out there who live large – they don't know how poor people, like refugees, live. They don't know



Photo: ChildrenFIRST.

– they got to know.

These are the voices of children who have participated in an innovative psychosocial support project that has focused on artwork done on and inside a set of old suitcases.

When I met the children in 2000, they were living in two large neighbouring apartments used as an informal 'shelter' for unaccompanied minors by the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS). There were 20 of them aged between six and 18 and they came from Rwanda, Burundi, DRC, Ethiopia and Angola.

I had been commissioned to do research on xenophobia for Soul Buddyz (a children's television series) and had approached the Jesuit Refugee Service, asking if they could

Photo: ChildrenFIRST.



help me find a group of children. The research I did with the children highlighted the many difficulties they lived with on a daily basis and their need for psychosocial support. I decided to stay in contact with the group through informal meetings once every two months.

Initially the meetings were purely recreational but through this informal contact it soon became clear that many of the children had been psychologically affected by their past experiences of war and displacement. A few were withdrawn and interacted little with others. Others demanded attention by dominating discussions, often behaving inappropriately. Many of them could not work together in a group; they were unable to share art materials or food.

It also became clear that most of the children's present lives were stressful. Many did not have proper identity papers and spent their lives dodging the ever-present police who sought out illegal immigrants on the streets of Hillbrow. Three of the boys had been arrested for not having papers. At least half of the children at this stage did not speak English well and struggled to communicate with the others. In addition, food at home was limited and often not enough for growing teenagers. Most of them also experienced some kind of xenophobia either at school or on the streets.

The children were ambivalent about their identity as refugees. When they introduced themselves to strangers, none of them said they were refugees; none claimed their home countries. They all said, 'I am from Hillbrow' or 'I am South African'. In their attempt to integrate into South African society, the children had begun to deny their own identities; only those who were trusted and known could know they were refugees and where they came from.

It soon became clear that outings and games were not enough; the children needed some form of psychosocial support.

The search for an acceptable healing approach

The children were very sceptical about anything that looked like 'healing'. When the group discussed what kinds of activities they could do together they were quick to say that they did not want to tell stories about past difficult experiences. They resisted any sort of 'feeling expression' game and told stories of negative counselling experiences in the past. One girl summed up her experience of previous counselling,

It didn't help me. She (the psychologist) just wanted me to cry about it. I got bored so I did and then she (the psychologist) felt better.

An approach that helped children deal with the psychological effects of their past and everyday difficulties had to be found, but clearly it had to be something different from the conventional counselling model.

It was clear that whatever work was done needed to allow for some emotional distance for the children. The children needed to tell their stories, but they needed an approach that would allow them gently – and over a period of time – to reclaim and integrate their memories and restore their identities.

At this stage Diane Welvering, an art teacher, joined the project. She used a creative mixed media approach where the children were given many different kinds of techniques and materials and were allowed to decide how they would use them.

This was when the idea of using suitcases arose. A suitcase is about a journey; all the children had taken journeys. A suitcase also has a face that is open for everyone to see and a hidden space inside that we can choose to expose or not. Would suitcases help some of the children to reclaim the memories, both difficult and happy, that they were now choosing to hide? A number of old suitcases were sourced in second-hand shops around Johannesburg. All the suitcases had been on journeys too, so perhaps the children would relate to them.

By this stage, the group was meeting every Saturday morning at Barnato Park High School, which is accessible to all the children. Each week the art materials were set up in a large open space and once instructions for the day's activity had been given the children worked uninterrupted for two and sometimes even three hours, with support from Diane, the art teacher.

While the group worked, some children came out, alone or in pairs or small groups, to sit under a tree with me to talk about the stories they had represented in their artwork.

Table 1: The Suitcase Project process			
Theme	Description of art activity	Purpose	Time frame (approximate as each child worked at their own pace)
The story of my life now	The children used mixed media such as drawing, printing, wax resist and painting to make images that told the story of their present lives. These images were then pasted onto the outside of the suitcase. Three-dimensional materials such as beads, card, sand, shells and found objects were added to the 'story'. Children were encouraged to layer their stories.	The media chosen allowed children to tell a story in a picture; they then told the facilitator about their picture. The telling of the story was therapeutic. The work began with their present lives, as this was less threatening than telling stories about their pasts.	4 weeks
The story of my life in the past	Using the same materials the children then made images to tell about the place where they had first lived and their memories of the past – both good and bad.	Telling about these images was again therapeutic. Because they were inside the suitcase there was also a measure of emotional distance as each week the bad memories could be left inside the suitcase until next week. If children chose to, they told the stories of their memories.	8 weeks
At this point, a weekend retreat was held with experienced counsellors and a psychologist. The suitcases formed the core of work done at the retreat. The retreat focused on traumatic memories.			
The story of my journey to Johannesburg	Firstly, the children produced large pieces of hand-made paper and then worked on these in collage with drawn images and images from magazines to show the journeys they had made to get to Johannesburg.	The tactile nature of the paper-making and collage work allowed children to spend time thinking and reflecting on what for many was the most traumatic part of their stories.	6 weeks
Where am I going to take my suitcase? Looking to the future.	Tracing around each other's bodies, children made large drawings of their bodies with their suitcases in their hands and answered the question of where they were taking their suitcases through layering images on to the body maps.	This activity allowed children to move from the past to the future. Many began to make concrete plans for the next year.	6 weeks

About once every two months, counsellors from a local mental health centre attended the group. The group then ate a simple meal together, sharing with each other and the facilitators what had happened during the week.

The artwork activities that form the core of the project are described in summary in the table above, along with the time frame of the project.

As the table shows, the artwork began with suitcases. Initially each child chose a suitcase. They were told that there was a suitcase just for them and they would know exactly which one it was. Without any of the usual battles over resources, each child in the group chose a suitcase.

The project began by working on the outsides of the suitcases and the children's lives 'now', as this was less emotion-

ally threatening for the children than telling stories about their past. The children were encouraged to treat the outside of the suitcases in a very tactile way using a wide variety of found materials. Each child was encouraged to undertake this re-invention in their own way, reinforcing the idea that the child has the power. At no stage was anyone told what to do. The art teacher and facilitator merely encouraged and led the children to a variety of media.

Once the children felt their suitcases were finished on the outsides, they began work on the insides. The insides of the suitcases were about memories of their pasts. This section of the work was introduced by encouraging the children to think of windows into their pasts. They then represented these windows in different media and pasted the pictures

Photo: ChildrenFIRST.



inside their suitcases. Again, the multi-dimensional layering of their stories was encouraged.

Once they felt the insides and outsides were finished (and this took more than 10 weeks) they began work on a set of small journals that would go into the suitcases. Again, the children were encouraged to work in a tactile way with many different media. This journal work was ongoing and by this stage, facilitators knew the children well and were able to direct the work, encouraging children gently to work on particular issues that they knew troubled them. But at all stages, the children decided what they wanted to represent.

To keep up interest, personalised, constructed objects were also made from found fragments of clay (baked and polished with boot polish), papier-mâché and wire. The choices of modes of representation and materials to be used were always the children's own. Every week the suitcases were brought to the group so children could keep thinking about their own lives, past and present. Children became very fond of their suitcases and the packing away each week in the facilitator's car was done with great care. In this way, the children also began to learn about caring for other people's work.

Art therapy?

Because the children were not working with conventional art tools that they knew, such as crayons, they were able to respond intuitively. Essentially what the children did was 'play' with the materials and explore their potential. Working in three dimensions with many, many different materials allowed them to play more freely as they did not feel scrutinised in any way, as might have been the case had they felt they should 'draw well'.

In addition, the children were always in control of the



Photo: ChildrenFIRST.

process. One of the central principles was that the facilitators did not interfere with their art making. It was a private process. While they worked we did not ask questions or give advice. Sometimes the art teacher would hand a child a new material or quietly strengthen a construction without interfering.

Many traditional art therapy approaches work with drawings and ask children to talk about these drawings. The approach used in this project was very different, but it was deeply therapeutic. The layering of the suitcases was a concrete expression of the idea of finding many layers to our life stories, which is central to narrative therapy.

Sometimes it was clear that individual children were doing deep emotional work while they 'played' with the materials. It was noticed that the more difficult the children's past experiences had been, the less confident they were about 'playing' with the art materials. It became apparent that their 'healing' could be measured by the extent of their engagement with the materials. As they dealt with emotional issues, over time they became more confident with the materials.

We soon came to realise that no piece of work was made lightly; every piece had a story for the child. For example, a boy who had survived the Rwandan genocide carefully cut out pictures of shoes and sandals for an entire workshop and

Photo: ChildrenFIRST.



then pasted them on to his map. When he told the story of his map he said:

These shoes remind me of walking and walking, and that I survived that walking. I was only 10 years old but I survived the walking.

From a narrative therapy perspective, the shoes had given an extra layer to his story that showed he was a survivor and not only a victim.

Storytelling

The artwork was used as a focus for informal storytelling. Sometimes in small groups, sometimes alone, children would bring a piece of artwork and tell the story behind it. Children were always given the choice to do this. Children were never asked to tell more than the story they had volunteered, details were not probed and if a child chose to stop the story this was accepted. The artwork was always

the focus of the storytelling and this created some measure of emotional distance.

Once the facilitator became a trusted person, almost like a family member, then many more stories were told. In particular, Rwandan and Burundian children began to tell the stories of their pasts and presents only after about six months. Some took over a year before they felt able to tell their stories.

The children acknowledged the value of the storytelling as a healing thing.

It is a must to tell because when a problem is in your heart there is no solution and it makes you angry. But when you talk, it makes you better.

For me it is like interesting doing all these things. I used to enjoy doing things like this. Memories of life, the workshop is about life stories. It is sometimes hard. Our expression when we draw. When we draw, you don't just draw. We

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draw how we feel at the time. We express our feelings in the pictures.

In the situation we are in here, in SA as foreigners, it is not like our country but this reminds of us of our country and helps us think back to the good things.

They saw that talking does help but that it must come later, when they know the person and when they can choose the time.

When we talk about our mothers who had passed away it makes us sad. We need the time to be right to talk about those things. There are certain stories to be told and some not to be told.

You work fine because the secret you do is call us one by one and that makes it easier. Some problems that some of us have we don't want anyone to know. Also, you let us decide and choose to talk.

It is good to give a person time and sometimes when you remember things bad, it is good to give a person chance before talking.

Exhibitions

During the project, the children's artwork was exhibited twice. Initially this was done to raise awareness of the lives of refugee children, but ultimately it also served a therapeutic purpose. The exhibitions became a way to integrate the children with outsiders and encourage them to be proud of their histories and home countries. Over time, the group became very proud of their ability to do art. At the second exhibition, they freely opened up their suitcases and shared the contents with academics at University of the Witwatersrand who attended the exhibition.

The project was profiled in the Sunday Times Read Right, an educational supplement. This again allowed the children to be seen, not as refugees only, but as artists, young people who had something important to say. This built their sense of self-worth.

In all cases the children were in control of the exhibition and newspaper articles; they could choose to do them or not. They were also involved in setting up the exhibitions. This reinforced the sense of power they had over their lives.

This public face of the project was very important for the children.

I think the exhibition was a cool thing to do because it will make people know about what real foreigners are doing – most people just stay in their offices saying they are helping foreigners without seeing the real lives of people.

We were celebs. It made me feel like a VIP cos the time we wanted to go into the art exhibition this man chased us away, he thought we are the street kids. Diane came and said we were the ARTISTS! I liked that 'we were the ARTISTS!'

I felt good that people were interested in our artwork and we were not wasting our time.

Meeting new people was the best. I met a young lady and her husband and she is an artist too. We met people outside the Hillbrow world.

Where am I taking my suitcase?

Once the suitcases were finished, the children began work on large maps in collages on handmade paper, to tell the story of their journey to Johannesburg.

The group is presently working on large body drawings, representing themselves with their suitcases, many making almost perfect replicas of their suitcases. On the body drawings they have drawn and painted and printed images that answer the question: 'Where are you taking your suitcase?'

We did not have much time to talk through this work to find out how helpful the process had been but two weeks ago I was amazed when five of the children came to me independently with concrete plans for their immediate futures. These were all children who were so paralysed by their past trauma when they joined the group that they could not even commit to coming to the next group meeting, never mind thinking about planning for their futures.

They now have practical ideas about next year. For example, two of the boys who are over 18 and at present in Grade 9 and Grade 10 at a local high school were concerned about the quality of education they were receiving.

I know I am not going to achieve my dreams if I stay in that school; even the principal said to me I should find somewhere else.

They had collected information about a local technical

college where they could receive a qualification in two years and gain entrance to a Technikon. Reducing a year of schooling is very significant given that they are both 18 already.

In addition, most of the members of the group are now involved in activities within the local community. Many have joined a local youth church and are actively involved in the Kids' Week the church runs in Hillbrow.

It is almost time for the initial group to move on, and

some have already done so, though they all maintain some contact. A group of new children has recently been referred by the Jesuit Refugee Service and they have already begun work on their suitcases.

But before the initial group disperses, they are writing a book that will include all the stories told over the last two years, as well as photographs of their suitcases. The book will be published by Double Storey books in 2005.

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work of David Tollfree and Narrative Psychologists such as Michael White. It draws heavily too on the idea of working with and building resilience in children. If you are interested in receiving a publication outlining this theoretical base as well as more details about the project contact Glynis Clacherty.